

TRIP DOWN MEMORY LANE

Celebrating our African historical personalities, discoveries, achievements and eras as proud people with rich culture, traditions and enlightenment spanning many years.

Saturday, September 6, 2014

UNIQUE AND CULTURALLY FLAMBOYANT FUNERAL CELEBRATIONS OF ASANTE (AKAN) PEOPLE OF GHANA



The Asantes (Ashantis) are traditional strict observers of Akan culture and as they are noted for "they don't do things by halves." When Asantes do things they do it to the fullest, hate it or like it, that who they are! They are truly a people of culture and they are worthy ambassadors of rich Akan culture and traditions.

One of the Akan culture that Asantes do not joke with is their funerals. They are well known for their strict observance and cooperation during funeral to commemorate the deceased and they unique event that takes place after the burial.



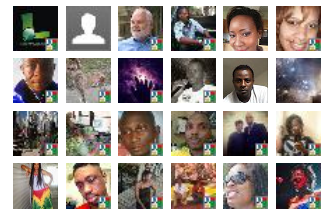
Wife displaying items she has brought to celebrate the death of her mother-in-law at a funeral in Kumasi. The items are what the women are carrying their heads

Like every culture, Asantes celebrate the transition of the soul of the deceased, into the ancestral world where it becomes a protective spirit for the clan, as a result the dead person is highly venerated through funeral celebrations. Family, friends and acquaintances, sometimes in their hundreds, take part in the

families

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kwekudee

Tema, Greater-Accra, Ghana

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celebrations. The participants dress in accordance with tradition, the dress worn by relatives is in red while the others wear black cloth and every piece of gold jewelry their bodies can support. There are many rituals: giving offerings to the spirits of the ancestors, food, drinks, traditional dances accompany him in the world of the ancestors in a flurry of drumming and wild dancing.



Asante traditional rulers greeting at a funeral in Kumasi, Ashanti Region, Ghana. Courtesy Anthony Pappone

To the Asantes, funeral is like a festival of a sort to them. They hardly have festival except their Odwira festival of the Asantehene. Funeral ceremonies are not only a time of mourning to them but also a festive occasion and an avenue for meeting long lost friends and family. As a result of these funerals has become a serious business and social gathering that no Asante wish to miss at the weekends. Every amount of money is spend to celebrate a funerals in Ashanti Region.



Guests at funeral greeting one another at a funeral in Kumasi. Courtesy Anthony Pappone

Professor Kwabena Nketia, the great Ghanaian and international musicologist and living African traditional scholar par excellence writing in the 1950 concerning the unchanging lavish display at Akans funerals averred: "The celebration of funeral is regarded as duty and no pains are spared to make it a memorable event. 'Was it well attended?' (Ayie no nkrofuo bae?), 'Was it exciting?' (Ayie no soe?) Those are the questions that may be asked as a test of successful funeral (Nketia, 1954: 48)

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Funeral celebration in Kumasi

A few years later Field (1960:48) stressed the same point: "A funeral must always be grand and expensive." But Dr J Danquah, the celebrated "doyen of Gold Coast Politics," the first African to gain doctorate degree from British University and one of the first Western educated Ghanaian scholars, sounded a critical note when writing when describing Akan funeral customs. Here he in his 1927 writing he added a footnote to apologize to the reader:

"There is no concealing fact that the account of customs as here presented would seem repulsive, perhaps objectionable, to the sympathetic student of Akan customs, whereas to the more sophisticated, civilized man, it may seem possible entertaining. Reading this chapter in 1927, I feel strongly inclined to omit it from this book..."

Funerals still cause ambivalence. Their high cost and extravagance are frequently criticized in articles and letters in newspapers and in recent times the new media, the speeches of politicians, and in sermons of pastors. In fact some traditional rulers have condemned it. A brief notice in the Ghanaian State-owned newspaper Daily Graphic of June 3, 1994, speaks of "expensive coffins, psychedelic funeral parlours, elaborate banquets, and display of extravagant items." Such funerals "are not meant to express grief but rather to show off." A related criticism is that family often spend more money on funerals than they did on the care of the elderly. In other words, they take better care of the dead than of the living. They seem interested more in post-mortem than pre-mortem care. As Akan proverb goes: "Abusua do funu (The family loves the corpse)



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- August (18)
- July (2)
- June (8)
- May (16)
- April (8)

Wife displaying items she has brought to celebrate the death of her mother-in-law at a funeral in Kumasi. The items are what the women are carrying their heads

- March (11)
- February (20)
- January (19)

Whatever may be the criticism, Asantes still perform their funerals in the manner they deem fit per what their pockets determines. Buses and domestic air-line travels to Kumasi on the weekends is a sight to behold! According April 20, 2014 edition of Daily Graphic when Asantehene put a temporary ban on funeral in Kumasi, Ashanti Regional capital, the patronage of domestic airline services dropped over 'the past two months' thereby affecting "revenues of the domestic air traffic of the six airlines operating domestic air services in and out of the region." Kumasi is the biggest market for the operators and currently accounts for about 50 per cent of their passengers.

The Chief Executive Officer of Starbow, Mr James Eric Antwi, confirmed in an interview with the GRAPHIC BUSINESS on April 20 that the ban had led to a reduction in the number of people his outfit flies on a weekly basis. "The numbers in our weekend flights have dropped. Mostly, the funeral travellers go on Friday and return on Monday or Sunday but that is no longer the case because of that ban on funerals in Kumasi," he said in an exclusive interview.



Concerning the Asante funeral rites, authors like Forde and Jones (1950), Rattray (1927), Mbiti (1975) have written that the rites which intend to assist the deceased in his life after death often imply the generally conceived intention of getting rid of him and to prevent his return either in body or as a ghost. Elderly Asantes opines that in the Asante society people are very sensitive to what is done when there is a death in the family. Death marks a physical separation of the individual from other human beings. This is radical changes, and the funeral rites are intended to draw attention to that permanent separation. As a result of the above elucidation, meticulous care is taken to fulfill the funeral rites, and to avoid causing any offence to the departed. By so doing, the body is subjected to all forms of body art in many ways. Among traditional Asantes, when everything pointed to the imminent death of a person, there would always be some relatives around and when his condition worsened, they would give him his last gulp of water to quench his death thirst. Right from the preparation of the corpse to final funeral rites, art is employed.

- 2013 (192)
- 2012 (110)



In the event of the death of a husband, the widow is expected to provide (artefacts) sponge, soap, towel, cloth, blanket, pillow and a long piece of hand-woven cloth called 'Danta' which was used in the olden days as underwear. These items are used for the bathing and lying in state of the dead husband. Upon death, the corpse may be washed, shrouded, dressed up, or laid on the ground or in a state with ritual objects or funerary artefacts near it. Religious Obsequies may be observed at the house, at a place of worship or at the place of disposal with funerary arts. The actual disposal of the body may include the provision of the dead person's necessities such as amulets, food, weapons and treasures.

Before the burial is mourning this varies from different mourners and relatives. Some of the various ways in which this is expressed are funerary banquet, the wearing of distinctive colours, or special hairdo. Libation is pouring and its associated artistic performance, offering, abstention from certain aspects of social life, purification and the like form part of mourning activities. Society at large also participates with the immediate mourners through response to graphic arts of obituaries, notices (a relatively modern trend), verbal arts of speeches, as well as visits and attendance at various ceremonies.



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The mode of disposal of the body in Asante culture is usually dictated by cultural, religious, economic, political and social differences or factors. Butt-Thompson (1929) also asserts that in some cases it may be determined by membership of a particular social group, clan association, degree of initiation into a secret or ritual society, rank or status such as chief, sex, age, achievements, ethico-social status like criminal, hero, villain, and manner of death such as suicide or accident. It is no gainsaying that the above factors also determine the extent to which art is used. The bottom line, however, remains that funerary art permeates anything associated with death.



Asante Chief arriving at a funeral in Kumasi, Ashanti Region, Ghana with his retinue leading the way to ensure his safe passage. Courtesy [Anthony Pappone](#)

Funeral Songs

Africans express themselves at various occasions through songs. The Akan of Ghana use songs and dance to express emotions including thankfulness, seek explanations and convey messages of condolences to the bereaved family. They spend time and huge sums of money to perform funerals. Akans especially the Asantes attach great seriousness to funeral ceremonies.



During funerals, different songs are sung irrespective of the type of music, be it Hi-Life, Adowa, Sikyi, Bosoe or Christian. At the various stages of the funeral, different songs are sung to convey different messages directed at different audiences or issues. The messages may be directed to God, the dead person, the bereaved family or to death itself. The stages can be when the person is laid in state, moving towards the graveyard, saying the final goodbye, after the burial, at the thanksgiving service or during the final funeral rites.



Funeral drums

The singing of dirges is not an organized performance. Bereaved mourners friends and sympathizers can join in the wail by singing a dirge of one sort or another. Singers are supposed to sing well and use appropriate gestures and steps where necessary. Regarding performance. Nketia (1969:9) offers the following observation:

"A good singer wins in emotional appeal: She moves her audience.

Nevertheless, a funeral is the Kind of occasion for mere display, though the temptation is great and many succumb to it. One of the requirements of a performer is that she ,should really feel the pathos of the occasion and the sentiments embodied in the dirge.

Pretense is condemned and mock-sadness is discouraged.

A tear should fall, lest you are branded a witch and a callous person.

If a tear is physiologically difficult to shed, you must induce it by some means; but if it is physiologically impossible for you, it would be better to have the marks of tears on your face than nothing at all.

The singers of the dirge rarely sit down: they pace up and down the place of the funeral, flanked on all sides by members of the lineage, friends and sympathizers seated on stalls, raised planks, chairs or on the ground. Each circuit brings them in front of the corpse or where the lineage head or the bereaved father, mother, husband or wife sits.

Some walk out then come in again."



In specific forms, popular culture is reflected not only in the dirges and odes sung to praise the deceased,

but more importantly in music and dance. During the public funeral celebrations traditional singing and drumming groups may provide entertainment for those present. The most popular of these traditional dance ensembles are adowa, nwonkoro, adenkum, kete, asaadua, and bosoe, in most of which women are the lead singers. Some of the accompanying musical instruments, such as the firikiyiwa or nnawuruta (bells) and donno (gong), are played by experienced women. Many of the women singers learn the art of singing early in their youth and an accomplished performer is very pleasing to listeners' ears. A person will be roused to join a singing group or dance if the song reminds him or her of a series of events in his or her life. As in the case of the dirges, the lead singers learn to be adept at manipulating people present by drawing on the direct and indirect experiences of people in the community and by being acutely sensitive to the reactions of the sympathizers and celebrants of the funeral. In this regard, a mutually supportive relationship between the traditional singer and the dancer is established. The singer can work the dancer to high frenzy and the dancer can do the obverse. Both depend on each other for the desired outcome. Until recently, the traditional dance ensembles were rarely paid for their performance at funerals.



An effective combination of excellent choice of text, poetic recital, and appropriate gestures is sure to captivate the audience and the bereaved lineage. The dirges themselves cover the whole spectrum of social life, including kinship, marital and familial relations, economics, political activities, and societal values. Below are selected examples of dirges usually sung in praise of the deceased. The selections are taken from Nketia (1969) and McCaskie (1989)

(I) An Expression of the Extent of Loss

Ahunu mu nni me dua bi na maso mu	There is no branch above which I could grasp
Asuo ayisi me oo, na Otwafoo ne hwan?	I am in flooded waters. Who will rescue me?
Agycl hehu mefi na onhu me yie bi	When father meets me, he will hardly recognize me.
Obehu me, na meso ketego ne nwansema	For he will meet me carrying all I have: a lorn sleeping mat and a horde of flies.
Mene womma bewe unanse oo,	Your children and I will feed on the spider;
Na akura dee} obopou	The mouse is too long a game
Praa e, mene wo mma oo	Your children and I (what will become of us!)
Ena e, me nko m'anim	I am done for
Ayya e, ahia me	I am destitute
Praa e, ahia me	Your children are poor
Wo mma rehwe w'ano	Your children are looking for you
Onwunu redwo oo} dee awisiaa afe ne nca"	The night is fast approaching where the orphan is dying to see its mother" (Nketia 1969:47-48)

(II) An Expression of Desire for Continued Fellowship and Love

"Obi reba a, mane me	Send me something when someone is coming
Mane me na mene wo di mane	Send me something for you and I exchange gifts
Eye a, mane me denkyemmoo na	Send me parched corn so that I can eat it raw if I am
mannya gya a, mawe no mono	unable to find fire to cook it on
Wore mane me a mane me	When you are sending me something, I would like a
sen kесе a egye ahohoo"	"a big pot that receives strangers" (Nketia 1969:49)

(III) For a Deceased Mother/Father

"Eno, nko nnya me akyire oo	O, mother do not leave me behind
Eno, nko nnya me akyire oo, Osiantan	O, mother, please do not leave me behind

Ena awu agya me oo:
Na mene hwan na ewo ha yi?"

Mother has died and left me alone:
With whom am I now here?"

OR

"Agya e, aka me nko
Mene wo beko
Agya e, befa me ko
Eye a, ma yenko yen dee mu
enye yen tenabere ne ha"

"Father, I am here alone
I shall go with you
Father, come and take me away
Let us go back together to the place where we came from Na
We do not belong here" (Nketia 1969:45-46)

(IV) For a Deceased Priest
Obosomfoo Kosekose oo:
Ohene ni, nkumankuma brebre
Woko a, duom oo, ohene ba
Gye due na duom oo!
Wo duru Kurotia a, ho wodin ma ahrane
mma wo so nu wodi amantire nu

Farewell, thou priest
Fare thee well, mother of the king
When you start, do not tarry, Prince
Receive condolences and proceed on
When you reach the outskirt,s of the town,
mention your name so that strong men carry you
shoulder high for you rule two worlds. (Nketia
1969:44-45)



(V) For a Deceased Asantehene (Asante King)

Nana atu ne kynie
Awia na ebeku yen.
Womim dee wo gyaa me
Ya ma nsuo nto na ma so bi anom.

Nana (the Asantehene) has removed his umbrella
We shall be scorched to death by the sun.
You know the condition in which you have left me
See to it that there is rain so that I can collect some
of it to drink.

Se womane me a mane me denkyembrebo If you are sending me parcel,send me a crocodile's liver
Mannya gya a mawe no mono. Which I can eat raw failing to get fire with which to
cook. (McCaskie 1989:424-25)

Singing a dirge in the past usually signaled the commencement of the funeral ceremony and remained its
mainstay for a long time, until it was reinforced and eventually overshadowed by music and dance
(Nketia 1969: 17). The very enactment surrounding singing dirges is a clear testimony to the artistic
endowment of Akan women



The use of coffin

Osei (2002) agrees that coffins are quite common in Asante culture. They were used in olden times. They are said to have been fashioned out of the great flat buttress roots of the onyina (silk tree). Rattray (1927), asserts that when a coffin was used, the body was wrapped in mats. The current study revealed that modernisation has influenced, to a greater extent, the arts associated with funerals in Kumasi.



Oral tradition suggests that in ancient times, hollowed-out tree trunks or barks of trees were the commonest objects within which dead Ashanti bodies, wrapped up cotton wool, were placed before burial. The current practice is that expensive locally made coffin and even in the case of wealthy individuals, coffins made of silver, brass or glass and like media are sometimes imported to befit the position and status of the deceased or to display the wealth of the living relatives.



Customarily, it is the children of the deceased who purchase coffins in Asante. Sometimes, too, it is some organisation to which the deceased belonged which provides the coffin. A most recently emerging trend in the Asante region is that neighborhood welfare groups Koroye- kuo, as part of members' show of love and unity to a departed colleague; offer to provide the coffin for the burial, among other things.



Body art of the corpse

Before narrowing down the discussion on this to Asante, it would be appropriate to look at the universality of this practice based on available literature. "The body is not only depicted in art. It is used in making art, or is transformed to become art itself. The human body is material for art making. It can be painted or sculpted, or can be part of a performance or spectacle." Lazzari & Schlesier (2002) Asantes cannot agree with the above assertions more and have therefore adopted the human body (both dead and living) and incorporated it in their funerary arts to convey ideas and beliefs at the expense of words. As a result, they have a repertoire of funerary body art

comprising painting of the skin, coiffure or hairdressing costume including footwear, wearing of amulets, bracelets, necklaces, anklets and general body adornment to portray certain beliefs in connection with the death. Asantes can also be identified with burying artefacts together with the dead. However, this practice is not the preserve of only the Asantes, rather, a custom in many parts of Africa. Mbiti (1975) identifies some of the works of art as spears, bows and arrows, stools, snuff, ornaments, tools, and domestic utensils. The greatest treasures ever discovered in a burial place were those of King Tutankhamen of Egypt who died in B.C. 1352. These were discovered in his tomb in Upper Egypt nearly 3,300 years later in 1922. They comprised jewels, furniture, shrines, and portrait masks all covered with gold, worth an inestimable amount of money.

In Asante, there are variations in the body art of the dead. These are dictated by factors such as the circumstances of the death, age, social position, and status of the deceased. Various forms of 'ghost' or 'soul' currency (Saman-Sika or Kra-Sika), in the form of ornaments of a certain shape and design, are bound round the wrists of the corpse. Gold dust is often put into its ears and into the hollow above the zygomatic area, known as sikagubea (the place for pouring gold dust). Gold dust is also bound up in a

small packet and tied to the loin cloth; hair is sometimes placed in the mouth. The research revealed that the hair is a form of money or has some value in the world of ghosts (Rattray 1927). The current researchers recognized that sometimes, the head of the corpse is shaved and marked with alternate red, white, and black stripes, made with sono (red dye), white clay, and bidie (charcoal). Benenneh, 1999 (unpublished thesis), however, gives a different interpretation of these colours as follows: "Invariably, the red represented the blood of the living relatives, the black, death and the white the ancestors. The motive behind this was also to subject the dead person to easy recognition should he or she walk as a saman (ghost).



Also in the indigenous presentation and the preparation of the corpse, the Study revealed that Asantes occasionally placed a brass pan beneath the head and later this is buried in this position, in order to receive the head when it drops off and instead of the hands being folded, they are sometimes allowed to rest with the fingers on one of the metal vessels called Kudoo which contain gold dust.



The bottom line still remains that the dead body was dressed and adorned far more opulently than it might ever have done when alive. Highly polished brass beds were in common use. These were covered with several layers of blanket and multi-coloured expensive and good quality Kente cloths. Generally, the body was laid in a supine position with the hands either folded across the chest or lying parallel to the trunk. It was covered with a very expensive *efununtoma* (shroud) which was usually a Kente cloth and adorned with every available form of "ghost or soul currency" in the form of golden or silver ornaments of various shapes, sizes and designs. This has also been confirmed by Benneh (1999).



Funeral donations

As a result of using cotton wool for burial practices, it became scarce and consequently treasured. Relatives then began to experience difficulty in getting the required quantity and due to this; they called on sympathizers, friends and well-wishers to donate some cotton for wrapping the corpse. This practice brought about the concept of *nsaabodee* a corrupted form of *asaawa* (cotton) and *aboadee* (helper). This also brings into focus the concept of *asiedee* (funeral goods). This is a practice where a widow or widower of a deceased as well as his or her loved ones give items ranging from mats, pillows, pieces of cloth to handkerchiefs and rings. A western dimension of wreath presentation has also become a common practice. Another school of thought among Asantes opines that the term *nsaabodee* has been derived from the practice of offering small quantities of palm-wine *nsafufuo* as donations to assist the bereaved family to enable it offer drinks to the sympathizers during the funeral. Thus, *nsaabodee*, literally means wine assistance. Whatever the etymology of *nsaabodee*, all contributions in this regard either directly to the bereaved family or indirectly to the deceased was termed thus.



Foreign religion and westernization have suppressed the use of certain traditional requirements of money and the other numerous items which used to accompany the dead to the spirit world. The dress code of the corpse, apart from traditional rulers, is also yielding to pressure from westernisation. This is partly attributed to the scorn with which Christianity, Islam and western culture look at this practice, as it is considered idol worship. The marginalization of these traditional requirements is also blamed on the

activities of grave looters, who, it is alleged, spy on the proceedings at funeral grounds and later loot graves containing such wealth. This second assertion is buttressed by the fact that grave looting is prevalent in urban centres where extravagance is displayed during funeral ceremonies. The application of art in the funeral ceremonies of Asante has brought about some cultural conflicts. There were situations when the researchers came across a dead Asante chief adorned in typical Asante regalia but was mounted in a sitting posture.



The Funeral Scene

Traditionally, Asante funeral days are Mondays and Thursdays if they happen not to be nnabone (bad days), days especially reserved for the deities to descend and partake of men's affairs. This situation has changed over the years and nowadays most funeral ceremonies in the region are held on Saturdays when government and other workers are free to attend. Thus, the complexity of modernization has influenced all facets of life including funeral ceremonies.

It used to be sheds constructed of sticks and covered with palm fronds that provided shade for funeral ceremonies.



Socio-technological advancement has however brought in its wake a more convenient environmental art piece for funeral ceremonies in Kumasi as well as in many other parts of the country. Hired canopies are the order of the day. It must be stated that this new practice has led to the proliferation of canopy-hiring commercial ventures in the region. Close relatives of the deceased sit upon mats provided for that purpose in front of the sheds or canopies while the rest, well-wishers, sympathizers and friends, are provided with benches and or foldable wooden chairs. Plastic chairs are now largely in use at funeral grounds in Asante region.

Opportunities are provided for well-wishers, sympathizers and friends to express their sympathy in monetary. In this regard, male relatives take their positions at strategic points behind tables to receive donations for which receipts are issued. It is an almost obligatory practice to announce such donations at the funeral grounds for all present to hear. No tangible reasons have been assigned to these announcements as the donor is given a receipt to show acknowledgement of the donation. It is now a common phenomenon to see donors crowding at public address systems at funeral grounds waiting impatiently for their donations to be announced. Formerly, only drinks were provided but now food is served to participants in the family house, or in cases where there are huge numbers of people to be served, other places, apart from the family houses, are sought within the vicinity to them. Sometimes, a catering service enterprise is contracted to prepare and serve the food.



The Adoo procession in Asante culture has not given way to modernity. Instead, this has been magnified to reflect a show of wealth. At certain funerals, especially those of elderly people, one may notice that a procession of women and girls dressed in Dansinkran outfits led by a group of others carrying well-polished brass bowls containing well-arranged items depicting an almost infinite aesthetic appeal. This procession would suddenly appear at a corner amidst chanting of appellations by onlookers. They will then proceed in a retinue, characterized by an uncompelling majestic walk, round the funeral grounds. Thus, Adsoa appears to exhibit almost all the art forms in the funeral rites of Asantes. The Adsoa bundles trace their origins to the funerals of kings.

Traditionally, the grand children of the deceased are not left out in the body art as well as the performing art

associated with funeral ceremonies. These children, who are not expected to fast, move from one end of the community to the other stamping the ground with old pestles and chanting, "Nana awuoo!", "Yemmuannaoo!" It is said that by so doing, they are insisting on a demand for money to purchase food, implying that if the demand was not met, they would disrupt proceedings at the funeral grounds (Nketia, J.H.K. 1955). This performance has however ceased in Asante due to acculturation. The grand children are no longer identified by this performance, rather by arranged black and white cloths.

Widowhood rites are still observed today in Asante. One must however be quick to state that aspects of these rites considered to be idol worship by foreign religions are left out. The widow contributes to the adesiedie (funeral goods) that are used to wash and prepare the corpse. Asantes believe that it is important to wash off the earthly pollution of the body so that the spirit can be transmitted into the spirit world. The items constituting a widow's funeral goods may include a blanket, bed sheet, pillow, mat, ahenemma (native sandals), bucket, assorted soaps, sponge, cloth, perfume and power, danta (loin cloth). Identifying the widow by smearing of the widow with ntwima (red clay) on the face and shoulders on the day of burial is no longer a common practice except in the case of a dead chief. Again, at the funeral grounds, instead of traditional leaves held by the widow, specially designed synthetic flowers are used. The dress code of the widow still remains kuntunkuni (black) and kobene (red).

However, the red cloth is now worn over the black, a reversal of her dressing when the death occurs initially. Sackey (2001), confirms that even in the face of modernity, a widow cannot put on any form of jewellery until after a year.



Significance of Color in Asante funeral dress and body art

Apart from the shaving of the hair, the people smear their bodies with white clay, a sign of death and mourning, the first striking thing about an Ashanti funeral is the clear colour distinctions in the clothing of mourners. As Rattray observed it, "The blood relations smear three lines of red clay (ntwuma) or odame, from left to right on the forehead (known as kotobirigya). A similar one called ntwomampaemu (division of red clay) is made from the back of the shaven head to the forehead and the same pattern referred to as "asafe" are made on the upper arms. Ameyaw-Benneh (1994), observes that, these patterns portray the particular mourner as very close or dear to the deceased. The three lines are probably related to the three principles which feature quite prominently in Akan culture: first, Onyame (God), the giver of the Okra and to whom it returns upon death; second, AsaseYaa (mother earth goddess) which would accept the body and third, the ancestors who would welcome (or reject) the Saman (ghost) of the deceased into their fold.



Asante women wearing Adinkra cloths at a funeral of an elderly person

Mourning bands (abotiri) are fastened round the head, into which red peppers are sometimes placed; the

russet-brown mourning cloths are put on; these are sometimes marked with Adinkra stamped designs" (1929, p. 150). Clay symbolizes the dirt or filth which death has brought upon the family and it is dumped on the bodies of only the blood relations and the widow or widower.



The sons of the deceased wear net caps with miniature ladders, red pepper and egg shells attached to it. The net symbolizes the helplessness of the wearer - Nsuoayiri me, na -hwan-naobɛ to atenaayi me? (I am drowning in the flood waters, and who would rescue me with a net)? The red pepper indicates the seriousness of the occasion, M'aniaberesɛmako (My eyes are as red as pepper). Pepper is red as well as hot, therefore, it symbolises grief, sudden calamity, violent pain and an act of war. The egg shells portray the saying, Atome ne nkosuahono (I am left with only egg shells). Had the father or mother been alive, it would not have been egg shells, rather a whole fowl. The miniature ladder on its part indicates the saying, owuoatwedee, baako mforo (the ladder of death is not mounted by only one person). This is a clear manifestation of Asantes' belief that death is universal.



The mourners who are not blood relations (and these would include non-matrilineal relations, affines and personal friends) put on black. Thus at this level black and red refer to opposite categories and relationships. But all "the outward and visible signs of mourning, the red ochre and the funeral clothes affected by the ordinary mourners, are taboo to a priest" (1929, p. 175). So that a matrikin of the dead in the priesthood "must wear white and sprinkle himself with white clay (hyere), as if as far as he is concerned, death and mourning and sorrow do not exist. The corpse of a dead priest is draped in white and sprinkled with white clay, symbolizing the antithesis of ordinary funerary customs, which possibly mark out the wearers as being in a state of sorrow or defilement" (1929, p. 175).



In respect of the corpse In terms of whose connections these categories are distinguished, Rattray remarks that "Sometimes the head of the corpse is shaved and marked with alternate, red, white, and black stripes, made with esono (red dye), white clay, and bidie (charcoal). This, I am informed, is done so that the dead person may be readily recognized if he or she walks as a saman (ghost), (Rattray 1929, p.152).

We see another use of colours in the ritual which terminates Kunaye, the ritual which among Akans a person performs to mourn the death of a spouse. According to Kofi Antubam, "After a year's period of wearing black cloth, a married person who has lost his or her partner closes the Kunayq rites at the end of the year, and In the morning of the first day of the second year she or he throws off the black and puts on Kobene (red cloth) for the ceremony, weeping in memory of the dead. Towards noon on that day, he sheds the red too and puts on white cloth tinted with green" (1963, p.85).

In Batrtray's description of funeral costumes, it is clear that the different colours worn by mourners serve as labels to differentiate groups in terms of their relationships to the dead. Red marks out the matrilineal relatives of the dead, black, non-matrilineal relatives and the principal group in this class of relations is the affines of the dead. For the priestly class however, none of these labels is used. Those in priestly office can only use white. A short comment on this is necessary.

The use of colour in denoting the specific classes and therefore the role of individuals in funerary ritual here employs two distinct levels of classificatory categories. In the one case a distinction is made between those who belong to the abusua (clan/family) of the dead and those who are outside it. Red for the former and black for the latter. But at another level, a contrast is implicit between those in the aforementioned statuses together and those in the sacred office of priesthood This distinction rests at a deeper level of classification, on the dichotomy between the sacred and the profane. And this level of analysis is supervenient to the former, hence the fact that a priest, be he a maternal relative or not must use white, the colour of purity and sacredness.



Rat tray makes this antithesis clearer in his observation that while the head of any ordinary dead may be "marked with alternate, red, white, and black stripes", the corpse of a dead priest "is draped in white and sprinkled with white clay", as if even in death, the priest is undefiled by death. This also shows the dominance of the sacred/profane categories over all other modes of classification.

I have personally been curious to find out what the combination of red, white and black stands for. Here one observes that another use of this tricolour is in the decoration of the funeral vessel "abusua kuruwa" (the clan or lineage pot vessel). The "abusua kuruwa" is usually of burnt clay pot and it "has a lid or cover which has been fashioned to represent the dead; it has frequently also red and white and black stripes. All the blood relations of the deceased now shave their heads; this hair is placed in the pot", (Rattray 1929, 169, 165) which the women in the maternal line of the dead carry to and leave at the place of the pots (esenso) in the cemetery where their relation was buried. I should like to suggest that the symbolism here is the same as the symbolism of the alternate red, white and black painted on the head of the dead; and that the idea that the colours should make it possible for the dead to be identified in the nether world rests on the fact that every individual, or his status, can be identified in terms of three things: his relations with his maternal relatives (red), his connections with non-maternal relatives (black) and finally, his relationship with the spiritual world (white). If the dead must be identified in the afterworld it is in terms of his social status that he must be identified which is meaningful in the light of Akan belief that the place the spirit

of the dead occupies in the next world depends on the social status he attains before death.

Coming as it is at the end of the funeral observances of a bereaved spouse, the ritual of which Antubam gives a description serves to move the bereaved spouse from the profane to the sacred.

And it is the stations in the process of transition which the distinct colours specify: black, the symbol of death, red a sign that she is in transition from the profane to the sacred; and, white, a sign that she is purified, and sacred, and the tinge of green is a clear indication of the assumption of new life.

In the contexts above, the emotions which the colours used express are explicit enough. Those who put on red and smear themselves with red ochre to indicate they are the blood relatives of the deceased are in an extreme traumatic state, and every effort is made to dramatize this fact. Those who put on black because they are not related to the dead by blood only share in the sorrow of the kinsmen of the dead; their grief does not approximate to that of the kinsmen of the dead. The third category of people is the category of priests, who, whether as blood relatives or other, express, as is due to their office, their complete disassociation from death, suffering and sorrow. In the midst of grief, the office of a priest stands for the spiritual joy of which the living are assured.

In looking at the ritual which terminates Kunaye (widowhood rites) as a ritual of transition one would see beyond these two levels - first transition from an old disrupted status to a new one in the society and second a transition from the sacred to profane — a third, the transition from sorrow to joy. The black colour which the widow wears to show she has lost a loved one gives way to red, which might here express extreme sorrow caused by the memory of the death or the sorrow and danger felt in the crisis of transition.

When she sheds the red and puts on white she puts away sorrow. She also moves from the state of danger inherent in transition and arrives in a state of joy. One interesting point here is that the emotional states which are prescribed for individuals or groups particular ritual roles and stations in a ceremony as indicated by the colour in use might not correspond to the actual emotional state of the person performing the ritual. And what strikes me as an important aspect of this conflict between actual emotions and prescribed affection is that the latter might be used as a means of controlling the former to bring about the emotional adjustment one has to make in situations of crises. This is what might be at the bottom of the traditional practice that when a sudden death occurs, death through accident, childbirth or other

(Atofowu), relatives do not put on black or red. They must, like the dead himself, be in white. On such occasions Akans who are given to much emotional wailing at funerals are forbidden to weep. By this device the sudden surge of emotion is dammed and the excessive sorrowing which might stimulate the desire to revenge and lead some people to behave in ways which might be anti-social are allowed to peter out. Also, when a very old person dies, white is the colour tradition prescribed for use. In this instance, people are not only required to control their emotions, but are also asked to rejoice. It is a common belief that when the aged die they bring the blessings of many children to the lineage. In this hope sorrow is banished.



Source: <http://archive.lib.msu.edu/DMC/African%20Journals/pdfs/Institute%20of%20African%20Studies%20Research%20Review/1970v7n1/asrv007001003.pdf>

http://www.ijhssnet.com/journals/Vol_3_No_16_Special_Issue_August_2013/12.pdf









Clothed in symbols: wearing proverbs BY DANIEL MATO

Much of Akan ritual practice, religious activity, social life, and art is directed towards funerary ceremonies and observances. Death and life are acknowledged and celebrated through ritualized behavior, stylized art forms, and full community participation. Funerals are occasions for deep sorrow and celebration as they recognize that the death was not only the ending of an individual's life but a reaffirmation of the life of the family and continuity of the community. This prominence of funerals was noted by the first European visitors and continued to be recorded by subsequent observers up to the present. Intriguingly, a number of these early comments on Akan funerals could serve today to describe aspects of present funerary activities (deMarees 1604, Bosman 1705, Atkins 1735, Bowdich 1819, Cruickshank 1853, MacDonald 1898). Descriptions of more recent Akan funerals and burial practices have been recorded by a number of authors and need not be given here in detail (see Rattray 1927, Nketia 1955, Antubam 1963, Denteh 1975, Bellis 1982, Mato 1987 et al.).



Dormaahene Osadeayo Agyeman Badu at a funeral

Families will acknowledge the recently deceased during ceremonies of remembrance held on the eighth day (nawotwe da) after death with dancing and wearing of "funeral cloths." Other rituals take place forty (adaduanan) and eighty (adadutwe) days after death with an important ceremony one year later (afehyia da). Important ceremonies of remembrance are also regularly held in the community to celebrate not only those recently deceased but to honor all those who have died (owuofo). These take place every forty days (adae or kwasidae) with a major country-wide ceremony (odwira) held yearly.



Funerals and later ceremonies of remembrance (ayie pa) are prescribed to follow established protocols of behavior and conduct in order to insure their success as a rite of passage and as a "social event." Funerals among the Akan have considerable communal prestige so that they are not only measured as ritual process but also as public display. The proper conduct of a funeral acknowledges established social and ritual protocols and must reflect appropriate artistic and aesthetic concerns so that ceremonies will not only be measured by their content, but could be equally compromised by not being well done. As was stated at a funeral: Se fun nya asoayia a, nna ototo no kon, or "A decent funeral procession is in itself a tribute to the success of the funeral of the deceased" (collected in Kumasi 1988, see also Rattray 1916: No. 452). The social component is acknowledged by people who will ask when discussing a funeral: "Were there many in attendance, was there much to drink, was there much singing and music for dancing? Were the funerary gifts for the deceased sufficient and did the family receive donations to defray the cost of the funeral?" A family's prestige was at risk if the local community did not think that appropriate efforts had been made to "send the dead off in style" or if those attending were not "treated properly." Attendance at a funeral is a matter of paying respect to the deceased and their family as well as being a major social occasion. People attending will wear appropriate funerary cloths and contribute to help the family pay for the funeral, for which they are publicly acknowledged and given receipts. Those attending will also expect to be entertained with music, dancing, and refreshments to lighten the day.



Funerals serve to recognize the fact that the deceased was not only a member of a complex structure of lineage relationships but also a member of the local community. Much of Akan ritual and ceremonial life is open to public demonstration and communal participation; their highly visible funerals are occasions not only for the expression of sorrow but equally opportunities for socializing with family and friends. It is an occasion of celebration as well as sadness and is aptly summed up by Field in her observation that: "At no time in a person's life is he as sociable as at death" (1948: 138). The funeral of an Akan adult sets into motion ceremonial and ritual activities which express personal and communal loss and allow the common sharing of grief while celebrating the advancement of a new ancestor through a collective feeling of community.

Akan funerals are not only a rite of passage during which the deceased is mourned through highly ritualized displays of grief and loss, but are also the occasion for the appearance of a number of different art forms which state and confirm relationships among the living while honoring the dead. These specialized funerary arts are the instruments whereby contact is established with the new ancestor(s) (saman(fo)) and through which people can express their familial and lineage relationships to the deceased. One's rank and status within one's lineage and concurrently one's position within the political and social structure of the community will be reflected in the arts displayed during funerals and subsequent ceremonies of remembrance. Akan funerary arts are closely associated to cosmological and religious beliefs and are shaped to reflect views of life and the afterlife, as literal and symbolic references are made to principles and deities.



The public proclamation of a death initiates a period of mourning and concurrently the first appearance of

funerary arts. Funerals are publicly active and communally experienced; they continue from the announcement of the death through the burial (detie yie) and during later ceremonies of remembrance. It is a complex period of activity which may appear to be tumultuous and unorganized to "European" eyes (deMarees 1600: 343; Bosman 1705: 364; Atkins 1735: 105; Bowdich 1819: 284 et al.). However seemingly disjointed, each of the funerary activities has its place in a coordinated and traditional scheme of appearance which allows and encourages spontaneous demonstration of grief and sorrow



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. Drumming and dancing, the presentation of symbolic gestures by individuals, the singing of dirges and laments are art forms which incorporate social participation on the broadest scale. These active and transitory art forms known as anigyedee have their "existence" while they are performed by family and friends. The materially permanent funerary arts of the Akan are well known; they include ritual pottery (abusua kuruwa), terracotta figures (nsodia or sempon), figurative smoking pipes (ebua) and the various cloths worn especially during this time. Personal objects of everyday use such as stools, toilet articles, family heirlooms, and possessions of the deceased may also be included as funerary goods and presented at the time of burial. The recitation of proverbs (ebe or mmebusem) and aphorisms appropriate to Akan ideas regarding life, death, and the afterlife are often stated during funerals and subsequent ceremonies of remembrance. They will be voiced by individuals who may spontaneously declaim a proverb with related gestures or be sung by a group of mourning women. They are now even worn as T-shirts and head bands at funerals. Proverbs and aphorisms will often have as subject matter themes which refer to human mortality and the universality of death:

Owuo see fie—"Death spoils the house"

Owuo begya hwan—"Whom will death spare"

Owu adare nna fako—"Death's sickle does not reap in one place alone"

Obi nim nea owu wo a, anka onsi ho ara da—"If one knew where death resided one would never stop there"



Closely allied to the verbally stated proverbs, physically displayed symbolic gestures depict proverbial statements in visual form. Proverbs and aphorisms take on added weight of meaning reinforced through body movement, expressive stance or gesture. The physical gesture is closely allied to its verbal component by restating the expressed sentiment or proverb in tangible, physical form. As McLeod has noted, what occurs is "... conjunction of, or an interaction between, two different modes of communication: the verbal and the physical" (1976:92). A simple gesture or body position may have a number of proverbial analogues to it. For example at the time of the funeral or lying-in-state, one will often see individuals, with their hands clasped on the top of their heads, declaiming: Ahia me o, aka menko o—"I am left alone, I am cast away thirsty and hungry!" Others may stretch their arms towards the deceased and state: San bra—"Do come back!"; or they may simply extend arms and show fingers in a 'V' towards the deceased (collected in Kumasi 1988 and Assamang 1992). There is a direct connection between proverb and gesture in these two cases while other symbolic gestures will be more open-ended. For example the gesture of the arms crossed over the chest with the hands resting on the shoulders may have any of the following proverbial associations:

Mafo ma awo ade me—"I am wet and feeling cold"

Osu kese bi ato aboro me—"A great rain has fallen and soaked me"

Mennya gya na m'ato bio—"I am forever deprived of the fire that warmed me"



There are a number of symbolic gestures in common use which are also found sculpted in clay as individual figures or attached to funerary clay pots known as abusua kuruwa. These pots are often embellished with symbolic motifs which have cognates in the stamped motifs found on the various funerary cloths. Other objects demonstrate this tendency towards the visualization of proverb in material form. The well known goldweights, linguist's staffs, umbrella finials, as well as figural embellishments of swords and stools act as carriers of symbolic form with associated proverbs or statements. As has been often noted, proverb and visual symbol are ubiquitous in Akan art. They are the means whereby a statement of fact or principle or a comment upon the human condition is given visual form and context. It is through this unique alliance of verbal-visual elements that the Akan state the "concrete and abstract" (McLeod 1976:9, see also Cole and Ross 1977).

The idea of a verbal/visual/symbolic literacy emerges from the cultural nexus of Akan society in which all are to some degree versed in the proverbs, symbols, and traditional lore of the society. Among the Akan, one's wisdom and the ability to present an argument, debate in public or at court, or to give opinion upon any issue is gauged by the ability to draw upon proverbs to support or make a case. This is often done by literally stacking individual and different proverbs to make a point. The importance of the spoken word in a non-literate society allied to an ability to draw upon the traditional wisdom of proverbial lore raises ordinary discourse to an elegant art form of poetic dimension and metaphorical subtlety.



When a proverb is supported by a visual image its metaphorical meaning is reinforced and literally raised to another level of subtlety and discourse. Inasmuch as the visual symbol can only be identified through its associated proverb or verbal element, it assumes the ability to apply the appropriate proverb to the particular situation. This process of interrelationship and dependence is to bring the weight of traditional wisdom, law, and precedent—characterized through an allusive structure of parallel metaphors—to address situations or circumstances which may not be addressed directly or are of too sensitive a nature for direct comment. Akans will also seek to address sensitive issues obliquely through the use of parables in speech or by some mode of symbolic display, rather than confront them directly.



For example when referring to the death of a king one might say: "The king has gone to his village," or "a mighty tree has fallen," or "he has fallen asleep" rather than state the fact directly (interviews with Okyeame Bafour Osei Akoto and Okyeame Bafour Boasiako). Many adinkra stamps work with the same process inasmuch as they will present the viewer with a symbol and it is left to the viewer's knowledge and sophistication to apply it to any number of possible circumstances. Visual symbols, as proverbs, are contextually directed inasmuch as they are perceived as a single motif with the potential for interpretation on a number of levels. Therefore, when looking at an adinkra symbol one may be interpreting only the most obvious proverbial association and missing a number of other symbolic allusions. This, however, also allows the opportunity for the viewer to interact with the stamped symbol and to choose the proverb or parable he thinks appropriate.



It is an everyday experience in Akan towns and villages to see individuals going to or returning from a funeral wearing some form of funerary cloth. The wearing of special raiment or funerary attire by mourners during funeral ceremonies is an extension of the idea of communal participation through public display. Traditionally the wearing of colored funerary cloths known as ayitoma (funeral cloth) or akonini ntoma ("cloth for the strong heart") was coded to the cycle of the funeral and would indicate the relationship of the mourner to the deceased and their standing within the family lineage (abusua).

These various cloths are described as follows: kuntunkuni, a deep russet-brown cloth was customarily worn by the abusua panyin (lineage elder) and close family members the first day after death and often through the burial. Traditionally kuntunkuni cloths are older cloths and often frayed, in some instances previously stamped cloths which have become soiled and have been redyed. As was stated: "The older and more worn the cloth the more it would indicate their loss and grief" (collected in Kumasi, 1988). A favorite cloth for dyeing as kuntunkuni are old cocoa bean sacks which may bear some resemblance to

the old bark cloth (kyenkyen) which served as funerary dress. This was said to reflect that one "had been 'made poor' or impoverished by the loss of the family member." Dark red or vermillion cloths (kobene) would be worn by relatives, friends, and neighbors during the funerals and frequently by all mourners during later memorial ceremonies. Today kobene is the most predominant cloth visible at funerals. In some Asante areas of central Ghana, a dark blue-black cloth known as birisi will be worn by the widow and immediate family through the funeral and subsequent memorial ceremonies held forty days after burial. For women this will include the wearing of an upper garment in red (dansekra) with a black or dark skirt. Birisi may have two levels of appearance, for it will be worn at funerals as a simple dark cloth whereas at later memorial ceremonies (ayie) it may appear stamped with symbolic motifs. These motifs, known as adinkra, also lend their name to the cloths upon which they are stamped so that when one refers to adinkra it may not only refer to the individual (stamped) motif but equally to the cloth which has been stamped. For elders of great age white cloths (fututum or tutum) will be worn to celebrate their deaths.

Symbolic motifs had been traditionally stamped on the so called "dark cloths" known as kuntunkuni or birisi. The fact that dark symbolic images would be stamped on dark cloths may comment upon a level of subtlety not yet perceived or fully understood by the non-Akan observer as adinkra stamps with their specific identities are carried on a colored cloth with broad collective associations. Adinkra images and symbols draw upon the same symbol pool found deeply fixed throughout Akan culture and expressed in all of their arts, permanent and transitory. Adinkra symbols are a complex interplay of the visualization of proverbs, moral maxims, and popular sayings. Some stamps are self-evident in their meanings through visual alliance to their associated parable or verbal analogy while others are more removed and often abstractly distant. Stamped adinkra images embody principles of behavior, and contain homilies or maxims characterizing man's relationships in the face of life's shortness and unpredictability. They comment upon the family or the structure of society or refer to historical events. A number of stamps can be described as royal regalia in that they are conditionally reserved for use as a component of statecraft. Certain adinkra stamps would be included as a element of the king's own royal regalia whose associated proverb would be associated to kingship.

Some stamps appear more often than others, some have fallen out of favor, while others, newly created, are added to the adinkra symbol pool for their uniqueness of design to which established proverbs are attached. Though certain older stamps may not be popularly used today they are not forgotten and are as valued as stamps which are newer and possibly more evident. Many adinkra stamps depict commonplace objects that have been given symbolic value applied to everyday experience or royal statement. Newly carved stamps comment upon political events of the past and present while others are created to serve a more fashionable trade with the growing social (non-funerary) wearing of adinkra cloths (known as kwasidae or Sunday cloths). This addition of new stamps to the "symbol pool" and the increasing use of adinkra cloths for purely social occasions reflects the elasticity and resilience of Akan art and culture in its ability to meet the changing contemporary world while drawing upon a heritage of tradition.



Adinkra stamped cloths are some of the earliest examples of textile art documented from all of West Africa. Thomas Bowdich, a British envoy to the King of the Asante in 1817, commented upon the wearing of "fetish" cloths or stamped adinkra cloth while residing in Kumasi. Sometime during the year of 1817, he in fact commissioned an adinkra cloth to be stamped for the collection of the British Museum in London where it is today (British Museum no. WA-22, see Bowdich 1819: 310). A few years later in 1826, the resident Dutch governor of a fort on the Guinea Coast commissioned an adinkra cloth to be

made to be presented to the Dutch King. The cloth was made as a traditionally stamped adinkra cloth; however an embellishment was added which included a rather crudely painted Royal Coat of Arms of the Royal House as a central device. This cloth was originally presented to the Court in Holland and is now in the collection of the Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde, Leiden (#360-1700).

These dates of 1817 and 1826 point to a fully developed usage of adinkra, including a number of documented motifs still in use today. The date of 1817, however, is at some variance with the traditional accounting of how the practice of adinkra came to the Asante. Local oral histories state that the use of adinkra came to Asante as a result of a war between the kingdoms of Asante and Gyman whose king was said to be wearing an adinkra cloth when he was defeated and killed sometime between 1818-20. The defeated king's name in fact was Kofi Adinkra and one of the most famous adinkra symbols, known simply as adinkra, is said to have been worn by him. So according to local traditions, adinkra did not arrive among the Asante until after the war of 1818-20; however the cloth collected by Bowdich dates to 1817, therefore predating the traditional date of its appearance. Recent field work suggests that this traditional oral history is taken more as an explanation of how the techniques of making adinkra came to Asante rather than the use of the symbol-stamped cloth itself. The techniques of cloth stamping are said to have been brought to Asante through the knowledge of the son of King Adinkra who was also captured during this struggle and today has a stamp named after him adinkra ba apau—"Adinkra's son" (Interviews with Nana Akwesi Mensa, Odikro of Asokwa and Abanasehene Nana Asafo Agyi II). There have been oral histories collected at Manhyia Palace in Kumasi which discuss the use of adinkra cloth at Court during the 1700s, so that it could be argued that the tradition was most probably in place sometime during this time (Okyeame Bafour Osei Akoto and Abanasehene Nana Asafo Agyi II).



Though primarily identified with funerary cloths, it is surprising that only a few adinkra symbols with their associated proverbs or aphorisms allude directly to death. These symbolic allusions may be direct or oblique depending upon the symbol or metaphor being addressed. An example of direct reference is the well-known "ladder of death": Owuo atwedee baako mmforo, obiara bewu—"All men will climb the ladder of death." (The image of the ladder is also found worked on clay funerary pots, as well as on the bronze gold dust containers and on the bronze weights used in the weighing of gold.) There is a modern adinkra stamp which has the depiction of a skull on it with the associated statement: Owuo begya hwan—"Whom will death spare." Another example of the stamped skull has the phrase Owuo see fie—"Death breaks the house." A new stamp, carved in 1992 by Joseph Nsiah in Ntonso, has death as its topic: Kotonkrowei da amansa kon mu—"If death holds you by the neck surely it will carry you away." It is only now coming into use.

Adinkra stamped symbols will address the insecurities and stresses of life with injunctions such as: Daben na me nsorama bepue—"When will my star change!" or Atamfo atwa me ho ahyia—"My enemies surround me." Symbols will set precepts for behavior as well as recognizing individual responsibility: Oبرا tese ahwehwe—"Life is like a mirror (not only is it fragile but it reflects one's character)." The well known image Sankofa—"the chicken looking over its back"—is an injunction to balanced and responsible behavior. Proverbial admonition symbolically states balance and peaceful intent through forms known in other uses as motifs for linguists' staffs or umbrella finials: Kosua—"The hand holding the egg" and Ekaa akyekyede nko a nka etuo nto kwae mu da—"Left to the tortoise alone there will not be any shoots in the forest." Adinkra symbols also reflect the pragmatism of Akan society to correct behavior and to be able to meet the demands of life's situations: Sesa wo suban—"Change your life" or Nkyinkyin—"Twisted patterns, changing oneself, being able to play many roles."



There is evidence to indicate that the wearing of adinkra cloths was once a "royal" prerogative and that through a process not yet fully described adinkra came down to the general populace during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, becoming incorporated as an element of general Akan funerary usage (interviews with Okyeame Bafour Osei Akoto, Okyeame Bafour Anti Boasiako, Abanasehene Nana Asafo Agyi II, and Nana Akwesi Mensa, Odikro of Asokwa). Stamped adinkra cloths are worn by the King during the weekly sessions at Court when the state council, the Asanteman, meets on Mondays and Thursdays and when he holds public sittings on Saturdays. When meetings of the state council are in session at Manhyia Palace, members of the Asanteman wear dark cloths (birisi) which are often stamped. This reflects the seriousness of the meetings and the responsibility of those in attendance. Royal precedence is reflected in a protocol at the Court in Kumasi which forbids wearing the same adinkra symbol as the Asantehene when sitting in state. To do so would seem to be a challenge to the King leading to an awkward if not intolerable situation.



It is during these meetings that the King will not only wear stamped adinkra cloths but, depending upon the gravity of the meeting, a cloth calligraphically inscribed with suras or protective verses from the Koran: Nsumankwahene Nana Domfeh Gyeabor. This protective cloth is also known as an adinkra symbol: Hyewo a enhye—"I burn but do not burn (it is fireproof, literally against others' magic)." Early use of Islamic cloths comes from a description provided by Dupuis when visiting Kumasi in 1820 as he records the King's wearing "a large white cotton cloth which partly covered his left shoulder, was studded all over with Arabic writings in various colored inks, and of a most brilliant well formed color" (1824: 142).



If it is a meeting of extreme gravity to discuss, for example, the possibility of war, the King would wear a dark brown kuntunkuni cloth known as (A)pese Ntowma, which has twigs of the (A)pese tree stuck into it. The Chief Priest for Asante, the Nsumankwahene, stated that he had calligraphically inscribed cloths to wear for protection when he met with other priests. He also had a large umbrella (kyini) stamped with the adinkra symbols Etuo (Rifle) and Afena (Crossed Swords) that was held over him at state functions to protect him. Another cloth, worn by a royal in the area of Tewobaabi, has porcupine quills set in a design pattern on a dark cloth worn when "serious things are spoken of at the local court" (Nana Kwaku Dua II, Tewobaabi). He also commissioned cloths inscribed with Islamic calligraphy known as Nsebeon Ntowma from a local Moslem cleric in Ntonso. In fact he has started a shop in which adinkra, inscribed cloths, and Islamic amulets (suman or nsebe) are sold to a ready market.

Cloths in fact are chosen for the King to wear with particular emphasis upon the appropriate symbol for a specific occasion or ceremony as an aspect of polity and statecraft. This selection is done by the Abanasehene. These adinkra images would proclaim the strength or power of the King, and therefore of the kingdom, which would be seen and understood by visually and proverbially literate viewers and especially by those visiting the royal courts upon diplomatic missions. Adinkra symbols worn by the King serve as visual validation of his authority and claim to power. The symbol Aban—"The King's house"—worn at Court refers to the stone house built by Osei Bonsu I (1802-23) and has come to symbolize royal power, authority, and wealth. The Aban was the first two-storey stone house in Kumasi and became the repository for objects, gifts, and the King's clothes under direction of the Abanasehene (Abanasehene Nana Asafo Agyi II). A number of the stamps argue the peaceful intent of the King, but also the ability to meet any threat once aroused. Allusion to nature is often metonymically at play in the use of symbols on the king's cloth when for example the adinkra symbol known as Okoto—"The Crab"—is stamped. The meaning is that it is difficult to draw a crab out of its hole, but once out it fights with total commitment and ferocity. The stamped symbol Obi nka bi—"I offend no one without provocation"—argues the King's inherent peacefulness. Once aroused, however, the King is to be highly feared as projected through the image of Odenkyam—"The Crocodile," worn during time of war and strife. The adinkra stamp of crossed swords, Afena, or of the king's rifle, Ohene Tuo, or of a sword and rifle crossed are direct references to his might. A number of symbols have specific references to victories gained by the King, the most well known being the adinkrahene—"Taken from the cloth worn by the defeated Gymanhene Kofi adinkra." It is also known as the "king of the adinkra stamps."

There are certain symbols which were traditionally reserved to the King. In the past they included adinkrahene—"The king of stamps" and Osono—"The Elephant"—among others. A new stamp carved in 1992 is coming into use in the direct portrayal of royal regalia: Ohene Kyini—"The king's umbrella." This follows the use of the state sword (Afena) as a chiefly symbol already in use for some time. Data recently collected records that each king would have a stamp carved which was to state in graphic form those attributes or characteristics he wished to be known by and which became identified to his reign (collected in Kumasi 1988, Asakwa 1992). These stamps are rarely worn publicly. One of these stamps indicates the strength, power, and wiliness of the King: Osono tia afidie so a enhwan—"When the elephant steps on the trap it does not spring." This is an allusion to the idea that a great man's troubles are dealt with so quietly that few are aware of it. It is therefore apparent that when dealing with adinkra as a means of political discourse, visual and proverbial wisdom are required to participate in and fully understand a system of symbolic interchange of subtlety and multilayered textures.

Historical anecdotes or observed situations are subject for symbol and metaphor. Gyau Atiko describes a particular style of hair pattern used as an adinkra stamp. It is drawn from historical fact for it refers to an event which occurred during the Gyman-Asante war when the Asantehene asked for the Bantama war leader, Gyau Atiko. The King was informed that Gyau Atiko had rushed so quickly to battle that all that was seen was the back of his head. Later Gyau Atiko wore this pattern of haircut during an adae ceremony. Not only did this indicate his bravery but equally his initiative. Another popular adinkra stamp often seen is Nkotimsefuopua—"The eagle's talons." It represented a design cut into the hair of the young girls who served the Queen Mother (Ahemaa) in her court. There is a corollary for this stamp relating to the servants of the Queen who are to exercise their duties and "Don't speak back!" So the symbol is not only a badge of office but equally an injunction to carry out their duties without question. This is extended to the general population so that when a superior tells one to do something they are to do it without question or argument.

The various people of central Ghana today have a marvelously developed system of visual symbolic communication associated with a rich oral tradition. However in the past they were a society with no written language. There is therefore some question as to the development and incorporation of stamped graphic images among the "non-writing" Akan. With this in mind the most commonly ascribed source for writing or the use of graphic images on cloth has been the Moslems of the northern part of Ghana. Trade with the Islamized north, prior to and after consolidation of the Asante state, carried with it Islamic culture as well as goods. Trade routes to the north which were travelled as early as the fourteenth century grew into a complex network of interchange by the time of the consolidation of the Asante kingdom (Wilks 1971: 381). Major centers of trade became sources not only for goods but equally for Islamic civilization, for the Moslems were active proselytizers of their faith and disseminators of culture. By the eighteenth century Moslems were at the royal court of the King in Kumasi as advisors and record keepers and were involved in the trade and politics of the Asante nation (see Wilks 1961, 1971). Under the Moslems the northern towns became major centers for the production of cloth and provided cloths to the Royal Court in Kumasi. There was also in Kumasi and elsewhere brasswork from North Africa with Arabic "kufic" script worked onto the surfaces into near abstract patterns (see Silverman 1985). Some of the design patterns found on these bronze vessels can be found in adinkra stamps.

The elegant shapes and nearly abstract forms of Islamic calligraphy can be appreciated for their purely graphic imagery. Literally the "words of God" from the hand-written Koran are appreciated as much for their sense of design as their religiosity. Non-Moslem Akan incorporated verses (suras) from the Koran—either as magical or protective formulas—which would be written on small pieces of paper and often wrapped in leather to serve as amuletic packets, or the small pieces of paper would be actually tied to a man's gown. It becomes clear that what was important to the illiterate viewer was the Islamic graphic image to which a meaning would be given consistent with Akan beliefs and principles. Therefore this belief in the "magic of the mark" as much as its textual meaning perhaps led to the development of the use of the stamped graphic image with an Akan subtext; the proverb: the maxim or homily.



Rod McLaren, also known as Nana Akwasi Amoako Agyemen, is dressed in traditional regalia for a funeral. After moving from Canada to Ghana, he was given the esteemed title Nkosuohene. Picture supplied by Rod McLaren.

The position held by a number of writers regarding the source and dominant influence upon the use and history of adinkra can be best summed by McLeod's statement that: "These adinkra cloths seem originally to have been imported from the north, and the patterns upon them may ultimately derive from Islamic writing" (1981: 150). There is support for this thesis and the so called "northern connection" with Islamic culture through the use of adinkra stamps whose proverbs or associated saying are directly related to Moslems sources. These include the Nyansoa po—"Moslem's Knot of Wisdom," Nkrado—"The Moslem's Lock," Nsaa—"A Northern textile Pattern." There are a number of stamps whose design is based upon Islamic sources with Akan proverbs assigned to them.

Cloths covered with Moslem script were worn in the past and continue to be worn today by priests and royals for protection and power and to proclaim their faith in that power in a public manner. Moslem clerics continue to write charms for the Asantehene today under direction of the Chief Priest of Asante (Abanasehene Nana Asafo Agyi II, July 16, 1992). Bravmann describes this balance of message with its visual carrier: "African aesthetic sensibility merges everywhere with the literary and graphic potential of Islam, bringing a particular stability and form to God's words" (1983: 19). It is this capacity for giving the verbal statement visual form that adinkra shares in principle with Islamic forms. Yet it is important to keep a balance of the assimilated Moslem graphic images with Akan elements, for the imported Moslem forms were applied to already established Akan proverbs. Thus it can be argued that adinkra motifs balance the verbal statement and the visual image to characterize complex thoughts through simple visual forms. It is an example of the ability of the Asante/Akan to assimilate external influences and produce a hybrid that is more than the mere sum of the constituent elements.

The growing popularity of adinkra has evolved to the point where the wearing of stamped cloths upon non-funerary occasions becomes a common experience. Stamped cloths may be worn at parties, social gatherings, or merely for "show," or for going to church on Sunday. This new use of adinkra has been given a name: when cloths are destined for social wear, they are now called kwasidae—"Sunday cloth." Increased use of adinkra cloths has led to increasing acceptance of industrially produced factory stamped cloths. They replicate traditional adinkra motifs and symbols but are printed with commercial dye so that they do not fade and can be washed without losing the image. This social use of adinkra has led to other changes, so today it is not uncommon to see non-traditional and gaily-colored green, yellow, and even plaid cloths being stamped. Fashion also appears to play an increasing new role in the use of adinkra cloth. Stamped funerary cloths are mainly worn by men at funerals while women wear the unstamped

dansekra and skirt (red top and black skirt). There has been an increased tendency over the last few years for women to wear tailored dresses made out of stamped adinkra or factory stamped cloth. Here again the idea of the unity or identity of the abusua (matrilineage) is conveyed by the wearing of a common symbol or motif, often tailored in a similar style of dress. Symbolic display, familial alliance, and fashion are fused through new senses of dress and design. There is an additional interesting and somewhat disquieting observation to be made in that as the wearing of adinkra cloths becomes more popular, those who wear them are unfamiliar with most of the symbols and do not know most of the associated proverbs or sayings. Also as more cloth is stamped for purely secular use, fewer of the cloth stampers (who are increasingly young men working part-time) know the associated proverbs and one must again turn to the few elders for information.

A number of recently developed adinkra stamps address the issue of death directly and in non-symbolic imagery as stamps have been carved with "Western style" written texts in lieu of a stamped image to display the proverb. These new textual adinkra stamps will state in written form:

Owuo begya hwan—"Whom will death spare"

Omipa bewu sika te ase—"People will die but money will live"

Asem pa asa—"Goodness has no rewards"

Nseu adgere yen—"We are flooded in tears"



The use of a written text in place of the stamped image reflects the growing literacy and comfort of the population with the written word as an adjunct to abstracted visual images of traditional usage. This transfer from the visual to the textual occurs in the transfer from symbolic motif to written text in the case of the adinkra stamp: Ekaa nsee nkoa, the proverb being: "If it were left to nsee alone the tree would die." (The woodpecker (nsee) can only live in the dead onyina tree where it hollows out its nest). Both a symbol and text, it has the same meaning but obviously the form of the proverb has changed. Unfortunately, as a number of recent interviews recorded (1988-1992), it also reflects the loss of what can be described as an Akan symbolic literacy. As was observed by a number of senior cloth stampers and carvers, "People go to school and they learn how to read and forget adinkra and their meanings" (Joseph Nsiah and Nana Kwasei Tawiah at Ntonso). The use of western text for adinkra stamps dates at least to the 1940s if not earlier, when a factory-made cloth was stamped with letters ABCD. Not only was it familiar to the literate purchaser, but, purchased in quantity, it would be worn by women to funerals and thereby indicate their being members of the same family! The use of text in adinkra reflects an interactive dynamic that allows stamp carvers and cloth stampers to exercise artistic imagination, as well as to respond to market forces in a search for new and prominent images to make cloths more saleable.



Modern politics with parties, platforms, and emblems also find a place in the development of adinkra symbols. During the first independent government in 1957, under Kwame Nkrumah, an adinkra stamp based upon a well known proverb became the Convention People's Party symbol. The symbol was of a rooster—Akokonini—and the associated proverb stated Akokoberee nim adekye na ohwe onini ano—"The hen knows the hours of the day, but it watches for the announcement of them from the cock who has to crow." What better metaphor for the leader of a political party and the nation! When a new government came into power in 1969, an adinkra symbol was also carved to reflect changing views: Owia apue esunu—"The sun finally appears." But perhaps the experiences of the last decades have tempered ambitions and beliefs in promises with some cynicism, for the same adinkra symbol now is titled: Ebi te yie—"Some sit better." During the run-up period to the election of 1992, when political parties were forming, there were numerous symbols appropriated from the corpus of adinkra motifs. Well known symbols such as the umbrella, elephant, eagle, and the hen with her chicks served to give visual, graphic identity to new political parties. They served to easily identify the party through the use of well known symbols and associated proverbs and to direct the non-literate in their support and ultimately their vote.



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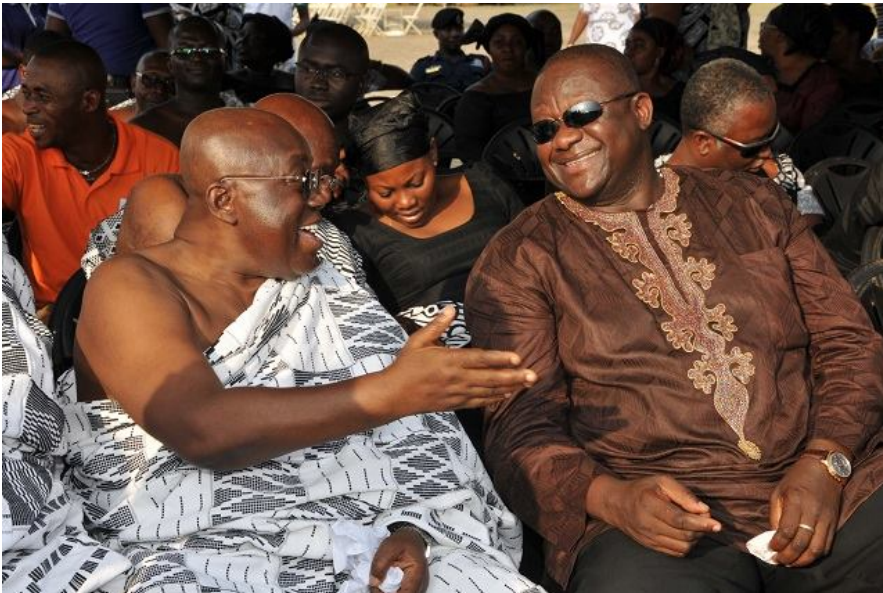
Death symbols, proverbs, and economics can interact, for when Ghana shifted over to driving on the right side of the road as opposed to the British system of driving on the left on August 4, 1974, it obviously led to an extended period of confusion as well as a substantial number of accidents. This led to a popular new adinkra stamp known as: Steer (na) bekum driver—"It was the steering wheel which killed the driver." The accident rate today is only slightly less, but the stamp is still in use with a new title created by the market women to make the cloth more saleable. It is now stylishly known as "Mercedes" or simply "Benz."

There was in the past a large lighted sign in Kumasi for the United Africa Company, which was a popular place for people to meet and talk in the evening. Sometime in the late 1950s a stamp carver in Asokwa

drew upon this non-Akan but popular element to serve as subject for a stamp known as U.A.C. Kanea —"U.A.C. Light," literally "meet me under the U.A.C. Light." Other stamped symbols or iconic motifs used today include "Benz," the "VW" emblem, and the radiator emblem of Bristol trucks. Bottles, flags, maps, advertising logos, book covers, and the symbol of the World Food Program which was taken off of a tin of tuna donated by Japan, are now apt sources for adinkra stamps. This creation of new stamps raises interesting questions of cultural dynamics as proverbs are either created or reassigned to serve the past in meeting the present.



Yet there are positive aspects to these new appearances of adinkra as individuals seek to wear cloths which are part of their heritage and thereby keep the tradition active in a new domain of appearance. There are also new adinkra symbols added to the corpus of known stamps that continue the interplay between the verbal statement and the visual image. This attests to the dynamism of Akan society as they actively incorporate the arts of the past to the present, changing appearance and use to produce an art form suited to its time.



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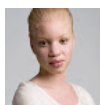
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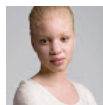
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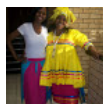
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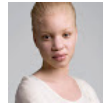
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HIMBA PEOPLE: AFRICA'S MOST FASHIONABLE TRIBE

The Himba ethnic group have kept their ethnic individuality and culture in the seclusion of Kaokoland. This ancient tribe of semi-noma...



TSWANA PEOPLE: SOUTH AFRICA'S HARDWORKING PEOPLE WITH EXTRA-ORDINARY DANCING AND UNIQUE CULTURAL DANCE

Tswana people are Niger-Congo or Bantu-speaking people including all the Sotho-Tswana clans residing either in Botswana, Lesotho or South A...



TRIBAL (FACIAL AND BODILY) MARKS IN AFRICAN CULTURE

Girl from a Umm Bororo tribe. They are nomads with cattles,by origin from countries in Western Africa. They are...



ALBINOS IN AFRICA
Albinism is a rare, non-contagious, genetically inherited condition occurring in both genders regardless of ethnicity, in all countries o...



PEDI (BAPEDI/NORTHERN SOTHO) PEOPLE: SOUTH AFRICAN WARRIOR TRIBE
"I am an African, I am the grandchild of the warrior men and women that Hintsa and Sekhukhune led, the patriots that Cetswayo and Mphep...

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